4. Significance Themes

In reviewing the story of Captain John Smith's Chesapeake Bay voyages and the context in which they occurred, several historical themes emerged. These themes relate to military history, the stories of women and African Americans, the role in the colony of craftsmen and artisans ranging from carpenters to glassblowers to goldsmiths, business and political history, international diplomacy, and the long-term transformation of the Chesapeake Bay environment. Three themes stand out, however, as most immediately related to Smith's expeditions and their effects: cultural conflicts between the American Indians and the English; the exploration and settlement of North America; and the establishment of commercial and trading ties between the colonists and the Native people as well as the colony and England. Each of these three principal themes is discussed in more detail below.

Theme: Cultural Relations between American Indians and English Colonists
"We demanded [of Amoroleck] why they [the Mannahoac] came in that manner to betray us that came to them in peace and to seek their loves. He answered they heard we were a people come from under the world to take their world from them."
—John Smith, *The Generall Historie* (1624)

Captain John Smith's Chesapeake Bay voyages are nationally significant because they accelerated the processes that destroyed the Powhatan polity, disrupted the American Indian world, and established the primacy of English culture in the region and beyond.

When the English entered the Chesapeake Bay on April 26, 1607, they soon encountered a variety of Native peoples whose politics, societies, economies, and religions had long been organized. A variety of polities throughout the region governed the peoples, social structures and systems of etiquette guided their personal and intra-tribal interactions, a complicated web of trading networks spread their goods over hundreds of miles, and worldviews that joined the seen and the unseen in a seamless whole formed the foundation of their religions. The Bay had served the Native societies for generations as a highway for settlement and trade, linking the coastal communities with other societies as far away as present-day Ohio and the Great Lakes.

The American Indians, particularly the Powhatan people, the Piscataway, and the Susquehannock, saw themselves first as the superiors and later as the equals of the English. The Native peoples' cultures were ancient and their manner of living in their environment was long established. They outnumbered the newcomers in 1607: a Native population in Tidewater Virginia of thirteen to fifteen thousand or more versus fewer than a hundred and fifty—a number that plummeted rapidly—for the English strangers. From the perspective of the paramount chief Powhatan, the English came to his country uninvited, sailed up and down his rivers, neglected at first to pay their respects to him or to the district chiefs, and occupied part of his land without asking permission. Powhatan must have watched in astonishment as the newcomers chose a swampy island for the settlement that would become Jamestown, planted crops or ate unfamiliar foods only

when faced with starvation, and suffered the effects of infighting, paranoia, and the lack of effective leadership.

Instead of attacking the strangers, however, Powhatan followed the custom of his people and gave them hospitality. His people guided them through the woods and up rivers and streams. They answered the strangers' questions about mines and other tribes and what lay around the next river bend or over the next mountain. They drew maps for them in the sand of riverbanks. They gave them feasts when they visited their towns, laboring hard to fulfill their obligations as good hosts. They brought venison and corn to Jamestown, depleting their own stocks of food so that the strangers would not starve. They even took some of them into their towns and homes to keep them warm and well fed during the winter.

The English, however, continued to go where they wished and occupied other people's land. They made their own alliances within and outside the polity and disrupted long-established networks of trade and politics. Their assumption of their own ethnic, religious, political, social, and economic superiority set them on a cultural collision course with Powhatan—indeed with the entire American Indian world of the Chesapeake.

Powhatan, having had some prior experience with Europeans, at first attempted to accommodate the English. After all, they had interesting weapons, they might prove useful in campaigns against the Monacan, and they displayed an active interest in trading that could benefit the Powhatan people. When Opechancanough captured John Smith, Powhatan offered to resettle the colonists away from their unhealthy river location, to Capahowasick downriver from Werowocomoco, where he might keep an eye on and control them. Finally, Powhatan incorporated the English, through the "induction ceremony" for Smith, into his polity. The English then came under his protection but also owed him certain obligations. Powhatan believed that an agreement had been reached.

Smith's Chesapeake Bay voyages violated every article of the agreement. He explored without Powhatan's permission, traveled into and out of the polity with impunity, visited some towns but not others (violating the Native etiquette of hospitality), negotiated trade agreements and alliances that were not his to negotiate, fought with some of the tribes (again, Powhatan's prerogative), and generally stirred up the entire Chesapeake Indian world. Smith demonstrated independence from Powhatan, to whom he owed obedience, rather than appropriate submission.

The situation deteriorated further, from Powhatan's perspective, after Smith returned from his voyages, assumed the presidency of the colony, and began dispersing the settlers. The dreadful "coronation" ceremony amply illustrated the cultural impasse that had been reached. Powhatan probably thought that he had demonstrated his superiority over the English, who had staged the coronation to make Powhatan a "prince" subject to King James I. It was a fatal misunderstanding for both sides. When the English continued their expansionist policies, further showing that they did not recognize Powhatan's authority much less consider him their equal, Powhatan held a final interview

with Smith in January 1609. The two men finally understood that the situation was hopeless, the gulf too wide to bridge. Powhatan departed, withdrawing his and his people's support from the English. Perhaps he continued to hope that the settlers would either give up and go home or limit themselves to Jamestown, where they could be contained.

For Powhatan to have any hope of success, however, he would have had to maintain unity within his territory. This did not happen, and in part it was Smith's Chesapeake Bay voyages that began the breakup by exposing weaknesses in the Powhatan polity. Those weaknesses included Powhatan's relative lack of authority over the tributary tribes at some distance from him, the willingness of several tribes to make their own trade agreements with the English, and Powhatan's reliance on advice from his priests; they soon became the special targets of attacks by the English, who knew that their destruction would weaken the Native culture. Years later, the polity would fall apart under the brutal pressure of English-style warfare as individual tribes sued for peace rather than be obliterated.

Powhatan's personal decline as paramount chief took several years. Perhaps it began in January 1609 when he abandoned Werowocomoco, which had been a center and source of power for countless years. His withdrawal may have been viewed in the polity as a sign of desperation, akin to the king of England abandoning London. If times of plenty and contentment were seen as indicators that Powhatan's leadership was "right" for the people, what did such a withdrawal in the midst of a drought signify? If Powhatan could not control these weak, self-destructive strangers—even this headstrong Smith—what did that say about his leadership? But the people also knew that Powhatan had led them successfully through other periods of difficulty. Perhaps this trial, too, would pass. The faith of the people in Powhatan was not easily shaken, because he maintained his position for years to come, but the decline of Powhatan and his polity likely began during John Smith's voyages.

That the English came to dominate the Chesapeake Bay region within a generation is due in large part to John Smith. His voyages revealed that although there were no Northwest Passage or large-scale mines of precious metals there, the Bay nonetheless offered a great deal of value, including fish, furs, timber, and farmland. His early vision of privately owned farms spread over the landscape came to pass before long, ensuring that the Bay region would be English instead of Spanish or Dutch. The English culture, governmental structure, and language followed him there along with the farming patterns of the old country. In addition, the cultural conflicts between the English and the Powhatan polity became the model for the treatment of the Native peoples for the next two centuries. The English disdain of Native worldviews, the assumption of English cultural superiority, the lack of respect for Native religion, and the presumption that land used for hunting and gardening was available for English occupation— over the years that followed, that story was repeated with different players from one coast to the other. English culture in what became the United States eventually overwhelmed or absorbed the Dutch, French, and Spanish cultures as well. The consequences of John Smith's voyages reached far into the future.

Theme: Exploration and Settlement
"The six and twentieth day of April, about four o'clock in the morning, we descried the land of Virginia; the same day we ent'red into the Bay of Chesupioc directly without any let or hindrance; there we landed and discovered a little way, but we could find nothing worth the speaking of but fair meadows and goodly tall trees, with such fresh waters running through the woods as I was almost ravished at the first sight thereof."
—George Percy

Captain John Smith's Chesapeake Bay voyages are nationally significant because of the impact of his subsequent maps and writings on English and colonial policy regarding the exploration and settlement of North America, as well as the transformation of the Bay's environment.

It is impossible to read the accounts written by Englishmen viewing their new home for the first time and not imagine them crowding the decks for a better look, pointing out the sights to each other, and shivering with a range of emotions. Relief: land at last, after long months jammed on tiny ships with bad food, bad water, and a mob of sick, bickering, smelly men. Wonder: everything was bright and new; the trees were tall and goodly, the meadows were fair, and the waters looked fresh and cool. Fear: they probably suspected that what lay ahead for most of them was death, far from home and loved ones, and each man no doubt prayed that he would survive and beat the odds. Pride: they were the vanguard of a new empire, defying prior Spanish claims and planting crosses for Protestant England. Ambition: they would make better men of themselves, if not morally then at least in terms of wealth, and return sometime to England more prosperous than when they left.

Wonder and excitement soon gave way to the realities of a life that was far from familiar to most of them. They quickly discovered that despite all the planning back in England, they lacked accurate information about their new home. The interior of Virginia was not the same as coastal North Carolina. Some of them had read the works of Hakluyt and others, but they soon found that reality trumped propaganda, as well as their own dreams. Being on land quickly lost its charm, especially after the first Native attack and as the contentions that had erupted aboard ship continued. The trees concealed enemies, the meadows did not yield abundant game, and the waters were salt-poisoned. Their fears of death were soon realized, as more and more men fell ill and succumbed. Patriotism did not put meat in the pot, and the supposed riches of the land were not found immediately. Instead of accumulating wealth for themselves or investors in the Company, the colonists struggled simply to survive.

They also explored the rivers and, in 1608, John Smith led two well-organized voyages up the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. Smith already had led expeditions to Powhatan towns near Jamestown, learning more about the land and its inhabitants along the way. He made notes on his "discoveries" and began sketching maps. Just as he was about to depart on his first voyage on the Bay, he sent a letter and a map back to England. The letter soon formed the basis for the much-edited volume *A True Relation*. The

Spanish ambassador in London, Don Pedro de Zuñiga, obtained a copy of part of Smith's map and sent it to King Philip III to urge him to eliminate the English presence in territory claimed by Spain. Very quickly, then, Smith's first map became a document of international significance.

Smith did not travel alone. He took fourteen Englishmen on the first trip and twelve on the next. He also utilized the services of many Native people as scouts, guides, translators, and emissaries. Others remained in their towns but described to Smith what lay over the horizon or up the river, or drew maps for him in the earth. He could not have accomplished his mission without the assistance of the Native peoples.

During the voyages, Smith made extensive notes about the features of the Chesapeake Bay. He recorded its animals, fish, and birds, as well as the flora that lined its shores and riverbanks. He also wrote of the people he encountered, their customs, and the assistance they gave him. He noted distances between points, the shapes of rivers, the locations of marshes, the positions of towns, and where he and his men had placed crosses to claim land and waterways for England. After Smith returned to England himself late in 1609, he began to expand *A True Relation* and his Chesapeake Bay notes and maps into his 1612 book, *A Map of Virginia*. He included the writings of Anas Todkill, Walter Russell, and Nathaniel Powell, who had shared his adventures on the Bay. In 1624, Smith published his *Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles*.

Smith did not find precious metals, he wrote, or anything else "to incourage us, but what accidentally we found Nature afforded"—in other words, the rich natural abundance of the land, the rivers, and the Chesapeake Bay. To exploit such resources, however, in Smith's opinion would require not exploring parties or trading posts, but a primarily agrarian society composed of farmers, town dwellers, merchants, and support industries such as ironworks. To create that kind of economy, the land and its Native inhabitants must first be occupied and subdued, which would require a massive influx of settlers. This gradually became the Company's policy, but it needed the royal government to carry it into full effect.

Smith's maps of the Chesapeake Bay were of vital importance to the Virginia Company and, with his writings, helped persuade the Company to make essential changes in policy that affected the future course of the colony. His model for settling the land, arising as it did from his months of exploring the Bay and its tributaries and the books he wrote about his experiences, proved to be the right one for the North American colonies. He influenced their development for many years thereafter and contributed to the flood of immigration that populated the colonies during the next two centuries and forced the Native peoples to immigrate to other localities. Thomas Jefferson, more than a century and a half later, quoted Smith's *Generall Historie* at length in his own *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787). So accurate were Smith's maps in their various editions or states that they remained the standard for the Chesapeake Bay and vicinity for most of the seventeenth century. They were used in boundary disputes between Virginia and Maryland, and were reprinted by Virginia in 1819.

Although Smith wrote extensively about the rich fishing grounds off the coast of New England, his words proved particularly applicable to the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. The Bay's fish and shellfish—most notably oysters—long savored by the American Indians who lived in the region, also proved popular with early English colonists and succeeding generations of farmers and townspeople. Once food-preservation methods and transportation improved in the nineteenth century, the increasing demand for oysters nationwide resulted in the eventual depletion of the beds and the eruption of "oyster wars" between Virginia and Maryland oystermen. The growing American population, runoff from farms, roads, and parking lots, and other environmental factors have contributed for many years to the problems facing the Chesapeake Bay. To Smith, the Bay's resources must have seemed infinite; he could not know how fragile is the environment that sustains them. The very qualities that made the Bay so perfect for human habitation—its natural resources—eventually would contribute to the transformation of that environment as settlers lured by Smith's descriptions and guided by his maps established farms and communities in Virginia and, in the 1630s, in Maryland.

Neither could Smith foresee the other fruits of his voyages, his books, and the evolution of the Chesapeake colonies: tobacco plantations supporting a system of chattel slavery and vice versa. He was not in Virginia when John Rolfe harvested the first successful tobacco crop in 1612, when the first Africans arrived in 1619, or when the institution of slavery began to grow as tobacco became the money crop in the Chesapeake Bay region during the next few decades. Yet his voyages, his maps, his writings, and his dispersal of the colonists as president, as well as the subsequent change in the landholding policies of the London Company, all played a role in laying the groundwork for the plantation economy that formed the foundation of Chesapeake society and eventually spread throughout the American South, with violent and tragic consequences.

Theme: Commerce and Trade
"And more over wee doe grannte and agree for us, our heires and successors, that the saide severall Counsells of and for the saide severall Colonies shall and lawfully may by vertue hereof, from time to time, without interuption of us, our heires or successors, give and take order to digg, mine and searche for all manner of mines of goulde, silver and copper."
—*First Virginia Charter*, April 10, 1606

Captain John Smith's Chesapeake Bay voyages are nationally significant because of their impact on the commerce and trade of North America and the Native peoples.

The promotion of commerce and trade was a major reason why the English Crown authorized the exploration and settlement of North America. To secure trade routes to the Orient, to deny resources and products to other nations, to achieve mastery of the seas, to enrich England, to establish an empire built on commerce—these were the goals of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I, and the Virginia Companies of London and Portsmouth were the instruments by which the goals would be reached. The colonists

who came to Virginia hoped they would make discoveries to that would bring wealth to the nation, the Company, and themselves through commerce and trade.

Before the colonists could begin trading with England, however, they first had to survive, and that meant dealing with the Native peoples. The Powhatan and other peoples of the Chesapeake Bay region were old hands at trade and commerce. A vast network of rivers and footpaths connected the American Indians of the Eastern Seaboard with those of the Great Lakes and Canada. Items of value were dug from the earth, crafted from shells, and derived from plants, and then transported by canoe or on foot from one place to another. The haggling and sharp trading-practices common to every culture on the planet were part of the Native peoples' economy as well. John Smith and other Englishmen quickly found that the Powhatan traders were as canny as their counterparts in Europe and elsewhere.

There were differences, however, in what the English and the Powhatan counted as wealth. Smith was amazed that he could obtain large quantities of corn—an item of immense value to the starving colonists—for a small number of cheap beads or a few pieces of ordinary copper. To Powhatan, though, the beads and copper were valuable for what they symbolized: religious values in the color of the sky and the earth. Individual wealth did not count for as much among the Powhatan people as it did among the English; it was not what one could purchase with the goods but what kind of power was associated with the item that was important. As Powhatan acquired items containing religious power, for example, his personal power increased, but his shamanic authority over the people grew even more. Gold, silver, and copper were valuable to the English primarily as the means to the acquisition of other things (land, livestock, dwellings), or, when they were crafted into ornaments, as symbols of personal wealth and influence. Among the Powhatan people, however, these precious metals were of more value to the status of the tribe as a whole, or the status of its leaders and hence the tribe indirectly, although they could also promote individual status. Each side probably never fully understood these basic differences in their philosophies of wealth.

John Smith's voyages around the Chesapeake Bay opened up the world of trade with the Native peoples to the English. Henceforth, the colonists would not be limited to the tribes near Jamestown—much to Powhatan's annoyance. Smith's journeys also informed him about the types of goods to be found in various places, from furs to silvery glitter for face paint to iron hatchets. His voyages also informed him about what was not to be easily discovered: gold, silver, and copper. The English thought that the metals they desired would be found in relative abundance, if not in Tidewater Virginia near Jamestown then perhaps above the falls or around the next bend in the river or over the next range of mountains or up the Bay. How soon did Smith begin to wonder, if the precious metals were supposed to be abundant, why did he not find any Native peoples decked out in them?

Smith's pragmatism regarding the natural resources available to the colony for trade surfaced even before his Chesapeake Bay voyages, when he loaded Captain Francis Nelson's *Phoenix*, bound for England in June 1608, with fresh-cut Virginia cedar. That

fall, as president, Smith watched Christopher Newport lead an expedition up the James River in search of mines again. Smith, however, set the men remaining in Jamestown to work making glass, soap ashes, pitch, and tar, and also led a gang into the forest to cut timber for wainscot and clapboards. These, he believed, were what the colony could produce immediately for the benefit of the Company and England, whether gold was ever found or not.

Over the next hundred years, Virginia and the other colonies would become major trading partners with England and other nations. Most of that commerce would include not the precious metals the Company and early colonists dreamed of, but the natural resources of the woods and fields. Furs, timber, tar, and the products of thousands of farms and plantations—tobacco, sugar, and cotton especially—would comprise much of the wealth of colonial and antebellum America. John Smith was among the first to recognize where the future economic foundation of the country lay in terms of commerce and trade, and he promoted in his books the vast and seemingly limitless resources of America. He could not, however, foresee the consequences of his vision for the Chesapeake Bay: the deforestation that resulted from the spread of farms, the pollution of the Bay's waters by fertilizers and other compounds carried by runoffs, the depletion of the Bay's resources such as oysters and sturgeon from overharvesting as well as pollution, and the development of towns and cities that permanently altered the Bay's environment. The intensive exploitation of the Bay's natural resources became the model for the exploitation of the continent as the English and other settlers spread across North America. John Smith played a vital role in creating that model through his voyages, maps, and writings.